

# Chapter 12

## Amsterdam: Neighbourhood Stores for Education, Research, and Talent Development—The BOOT Project

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### 12.1 Introduction

Amsterdam is increasingly torn—between wanting to be a “social” city on the one hand, and a “competitive” city on the other. The fact that the Labour Party (*Partij van de Arbeid*, or PvdA) was the largest party in the municipal council from the end of the Second World War until 2014 and that the mayor has always been a member of this party during this period indicates that Amsterdam is, to this day, a city that treasures a secure safety net for the more vulnerable segments of society. Yet, the fact that during the last two decades the municipal coalition has included representatives from the left to the right side of the political spectrum shows that the stronger leftist tendencies once there in the past have made way for a more moderated ideology. Whilst equality and solidarity are undoubtedly still defining values in the social and political mentality of Amsterdam, the city has progressively become more and more open to the ideas of differentiation and efficiency.

An important recent occurrence that marked the way in which Amsterdam currently approaches the provision of local welfare services was the introduction of the national Community Development Programme (*wijkaanpak*) in 2007, an integrated, more holistic approach towards neighbourhood regeneration; besides improving the physical environment, the *wijkaanpak* aims to enhance the broader liveability (*leefbaarheid*) in disadvantaged neighbourhoods—that is, to improve the social and the economic environment too. Moreover, in the *wijkaanpak*, citizen participation is

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key. At the same time, the *wijkaanpak* encourages various actors that are involved in the provision of welfare services at the local level to engage in new partnerships with other actors that are operating within their same neighbourhoods. In practice, the *wijkaanpak* has been pushing for all of the various actors involved in the provision of welfare services in Amsterdam to join forces and tackle societal problems in a more coordinated and more efficient manner. Existing (welfare) organizations are thus increasingly forced to reconsider not only their approach towards the provision of welfare services but also their (traditional) organizational culture.

Neighbourhood Stores for Education, Research, and Talent Development (*Buurtwinkels voor Onderzoek, Onderwijs en Talentontwikkeling*, or BOOT) can be seen as a confluence of these developments, a national drive towards more collaboration and a local evolution towards pragmatic, tailored solutions to the problems of specific areas.

## 12.2 Neighbourhood Stores for Education, Research, and Talent Development (*Buurtwinkels voor Onderzoek, Onderwijs en Talentontwikkeling*)

The nationally implemented Community Development Programme (*wijkaanpak*) that started in 2007 raised the question about how the Hogeschool van Amsterdam (HvA)—the largest institute for higher professional education in Amsterdam—could connect the knowledge and the competences of its students, teachers, researchers, and network to the so-called problem areas (*aandachtswijken*) in Amsterdam, in such a way as to contribute to the socioeconomic development of these neighbourhoods. In the meanwhile, the HvA aspired to be the university *of* Amsterdam, *for* Amsterdam. Hence, in consultation with the municipality, the HvA came up with the BOOT concept.

The first BOOT was opened in 2008, and by now there are four BOOTs in four different city districts (West, Oost, Zuid-Oost, and Nieuw-West). Various programmes of different domains of the university give their students the opportunity to do an internship for a minimum of 5 months and a maximum of 10 months, 4–5 days a week, at one of the BOOTs. These domains include the Domain of Economics and Management (*Domein Economie en Management*, or DEM), the Domain Technique (*Domein Techniek*), and the Domain Society and Law (*Domein Maatschappij en Recht*, or DMR). Accordingly, various services are offered at BOOTs. The standard set of services that are provided in all BOOTs comprises financial, legal, social, and nutritional consultation hours, homework support for 6–10-year-olds, and an atelier for urban renewal. In addition, depending on the specific needs of the neighbourhood/residents/organizations, BOOTs may also engage in other activities.

### ***12.2.1 Conceptions and Ways of Addressing Users***

In reality, there are different kinds of users of BOOTs. From the perspective of the university, the main users are the students—BOOTs are set up and supported by the HvA so that their students can gain practical experience and their teachers are more in contact with their work field. Ultimately, for the university, what matters the most is that through the BOOTs, they are able to educate better social workers for the future. At the same time, BOOTs are also used by city districts and local (welfare) organizations to conduct research projects and/or to help them in their provision of (welfare) services. Last but certainly not the least, BOOTs are used by residents of deprived neighbourhoods, who resort to the students for personal advice as well as for help to organize activities in their neighbourhood.

For the residents of disadvantaged neighbourhoods to which students in the BOOTs are offering their services, BOOTs appear to be an easily accessible point of information and assistance. Whilst some residents, for one reason or another, may be more hesitant to approach formal services that are provided by more traditional (municipal) welfare organizations, they seem to be less hesitant to approach the (students in the) BOOTs for help. Moreover, residents that resort to BOOTs seem to value the fact that students take their time to figure things out for them and that they try to offer more personalized assistance than they do in other existing welfare organizations/associations. That on average 350–500 residents visit the various BOOT locations every week indicates that residents of disadvantaged neighbourhoods appreciate the existence of a BOOT in their vicinity.

### ***12.2.2 Internal Organization and Modes of Working***

The way in which BOOTs are internally organized is mainly decided by the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences. The HvA delivers most of the staff for the BOOTs (be they students, teachers, or mentors), it supplies the bulk of the funding (most of the participating “domains” at the university contribute a certain amount of money to be able to pay for the staff and the necessary equipment), and its academic schedule decides the timeframe of the activities that are carried out in the BOOTs. However, in most cases, housing corporations provide the location, and the city districts pay the fixed costs such as gas, electricity, water, and Internet. In some cases, BOOTs have set up a so-called Neighbourhood Partner Agreement (*wijkpartnerovereenkomst*), which is an agreement between the BOOT and partnering organizations in which BOOT promises to provide certain services in return for a location/compensation of the fixed costs. In other cases, it is the city district itself that asked for a BOOT to be set up and thus also provides a location for them. By now, all BOOTs have not only a standard set of services that they provide but they also carry out additional services/activities depending on the specific needs and desires of residents and organizations in the neighbourhood, like the manager of

BOOT explains: “It’s a bit like a menu, where you can choose: I want a BOOT with the standard set of services. But if you want BOOT to carry out extra projects on top of those [...] then that is also financed separately”(Manager BOOT).

The modes of working, though—in terms of the services that a BOOT offers—are very much based on the needs of the neighbourhood in which a BOOT is located. In fact, BOOTs seek to fill the gaps in welfare provision that are left by other (municipal) welfare organizations that are already active in the neighbourhood—either by offering specific types of services or by targeting specific groups of residents. To be able to fill this gap and to adjust the services that are offered by BOOTs to those that are provided by other organizations, close collaboration with existing (welfare) organizations in the neighbourhood is crucial.

### ***12.2.3 Interaction with the Local Welfare System***

As BOOTs focus on providing welfare services that are not yet being offered (enough) in a particular neighbourhood, there is a strong interaction with the local welfare system in the different neighbourhoods in which they are located, and they maintain a closely cooperating network of partners. In fact, the most innovative aspect of BOOTs is the binding role that an educational facility like the HvA—as a fresh and more neutral actor in the field of welfare provision—plays between different (welfare) organizations that are operating within the same territorial boundaries, yet not necessarily cooperating much. When BOOTs first started, for many welfare organizations that were already in those neighbourhoods, this was a difficult transition to make, as they had been used to providing a particular service in a certain way and were generally very much focused towards the inside—on their own activities/organization. BOOTs bring many of these different, so far disconnected, actors together, which not only provides a clearer overview of the services that are present in a certain neighbourhood and of those that are lacking but it also stimulates all partnering organizations to have a more outward look. As the manager of BOOT noted:

(...) You have to give it a lot of time to build up a trusting relationship. And, the most important—and in that you can educate other organizations a bit too—is that you put the residents at the centre of it all. Because it’s actually a bit weird that you would see this as competition ... You have been put there with money from the government to carry out services for the residents. If you can do that better with someone else’s help, it is a bit weird if you wouldn’t want to do that. But that is something that with the Community Development Program (‘wijkaanpak’) was a cultural process also. Organizations were very much turned towards themselves, and well, they had to start working more result-driven. [...] While, the point of the ‘wijkaanpak’ was that you would bring your forces together to solve societal problems. [...] And I think that we... because we were independent—so we were not part of the municipality, or of housing corporations, or welfare organizations—we tried to get everybody to turn a bit more towards the outside (Manager BOOT).

### 12.2.4 *Future Developments*

The entire BOOT concept is based on nonprofit-making growth model, which may be difficult to maintain in a future where all partners are facing budget cuts. BOOTs too are thus constantly looking for ways to innovate themselves, so they can somehow continue to offer their services in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The BOOT manager stressed the importance of mobilising and pooling different resources:

At some point the city district is going to pull itself back more, simply because they are not getting any money for this anymore. And then you have to look at (...) how you can keep this going, without costing more money, but that you still grow. [...] So you have to look how you can create an exchange system with existing partners, so they can keep their costs low by using students. [...] We are especially busy with looking at how residents—because there is of course a lot of knowledge also with residents, and time, unfortunately these days also with people who are highly qualified, but that are unemployed—to look at how they can guide the students for a part. [...] That would be great, matching the trend that residents themselves are looking for themselves how to organize things.

BOOT—for which the motivation and the driving force comes from more “common” educational facilities—is perhaps a type of innovation that is more likely to be diffused in an international context, and, as a matter of fact, already is:

We talk a lot with other educational facilities—like ROC, in Holland, the University of Applied Sciences in Nijmegen—to see how they could do that within their own context. And that gives us a lot of interesting information. So there are also other BOOT concepts in other parts of the Netherlands, who do it in their own way. That fits with their university; that fits with the needs of the residents that live in those neighbourhoods. And that is a movement that I think has been very good, to see how higher educational facilities can do more than just education in the traditional way. But how can you really use that exchange with the city? And that’s a trend that you see in the whole of the Netherlands, even in Europe (Manager BOOT).

What certainly helps diffusion is the existence of an extensive network of third sector (welfare) organizations and the presence of local governments that take on a leading and steering role. In the case of Amsterdam, the fact that there are already many local welfare provisions in place means that knowledge and personnel are often there, but it is a matter of coordinating efforts more efficiently. While local governments may not be able to provide financial support the way they used to in the past, it is all the more important that they remain active in bringing scattered and disjointed (welfare) organizations closer together. In Amsterdam, although the public administration surrounding welfare provisions is bulky and fragmented, the fact that it is a capital city that wants to set an example in the Netherlands also puts pressure on the administration to be innovative and dynamic. In other words, politically, a change of (organizational) culture must be supported and encouraged.

## 12.3 Conclusion

Due to its particular (political) history and (administrative) structure, Amsterdam has an extensive and intricate system of separate and rather compartmentalized actors involved in the provision of local welfare services. Every city district has its own (welfare) programme and organizations, and due to the availability of sufficient funding/subsidies, all of these actors have long had the possibility of working fairly independently from one another. Instead, at the moment, the political discourse in Amsterdam calls for social innovations that target social cohesion at the local level in an efficient manner. Hence, the political discourse favours social innovations that promote closer collaboration between the many (disjointed) actors that are involved in the provision of welfare services at the local level and that encourage new actors—including for example universities—to step up to the plate. In particular, the innovations that seem to enjoy most (political/financial) support are those that seek to combine both the social and the competitive side of the city and try to bridge the gap between those two (so far rather disconnected) worlds. BOOTs are a prime example of this.

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